Saladinism: Justice, Human Dignity, and Islamic Hermeneutics for the Contemporary Era

Author: Hélder Augusto Barbosa Araújo (Portugal)

Introduction

Throughout Islamic history, few figures have achieved such enduring prestige as Sultan **Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb (Saladin)**. Renowned for his leadership during the Crusades, he has remained in historical memory not only because of his military victories but, above all, because of the justice, moderation, and mercy he demonstrated following the recapture of Jerusalem in 1187. While many christians expected retaliation, Saladin chose clemency, the protection of civilians, and respect for holy sites, becoming a symbol of ethical governance for both the Islamic world and many European chroniclers; due to this, he became the greatest practical demonstration of the moral superiority and justice of Islam before the world. Within his sultanate, Saladin was the ruler of a vast and immensely wealthy empire, yet he lived an extremely simple and austere life. He spent the state's treasures on building schools (madrasas), hospitals, and fortifications, or distributed them among his soldiers and the poor. When he died in 1193, in Damascus, it was discovered that the most generous sultan of the East did not have enough money in his personal treasury to pay for his own funeral."

Inspired by this moral legacy, the present essay proposes a new philosophical framework—**Saladinism**—according to which the interpretation of Islam should seek to realize the higher principles of justice (*'Adl*), mercy (*Rahmah*), human dignity (*Karamah*), and the preservation of life through **Ijtihad** (independent reasoning) and the **Maqasid al-Shariah** (the higher objectives of Islamic law).

Saladinism does not seek to alter divine revelation or replace the authority of the Quran. Rather, it seeks to recover the Islamic intellectual tradition of contextual interpretation, recognizing that fidelity to religion requires understanding not only the message of revelation but also its ethical purpose.

I. Hermeneutics as a Continuation of Tradition

From the earliest centuries of Islam, different legal and theological schools developed distinct interpretations of revelation.

Saladinism is founded upon three principles:

- the Qur'an remains immutable;
- human interpretation changes;
- Ijtihad constitutes a legitimate instrument within the Islamic tradition.

Thus, Saladinism remains faithful to the objectives of revelation.

II. The Maqasid al-Shariah as the Center of Ethics

The purpose of the Shariah does not consist solely in the literal application of legal rules.

Its higher objectives include:

- justice (*'Adl*);
- mercy (*Rahmah*);
- preservation of life;
- human dignity (*Karamah*);
- protection of the community.

Whenever a particular interpretation results in systematic injustice, unnecessary suffering, or the destruction of life, it should be reassessed in light of these principles.

III. The Human Being as the Center of Moral Responsibility

The Quran presents the human being as a bearer of responsibility and dignity bestowed by Allah.

The diversity of creation constitutes one of the signs (*Ayat*) of divine wisdom.

Accordingly, religious interpretation should recognize that every person possesses inherent dignity and deserves protection against injustice, regardless of social status, origin, or personal circumstances.

IV. Privacy and the Limits of Authority

The Islamic tradition likewise recognizes limits on political authority.

Principles such as **Sitr** (the protection of privacy) establish that:

- private life should not be subject to constant surveillance;
- the state should not investigate personal affairs without legitimate grounds;
- the spiritual relationship belongs primarily to the individual and Allah.

Public authority exists to safeguard justice, not to exercise perpetual control over the private sphere.

V. Applying the Tradition to Contemporary Challenges

Saladinism maintains that contemporary challenges should be addressed through **Ijtihad** and the **Maqasid al-Shariah**, distinguishing between the universal principles of revelation and legal interpretations shaped by historical circumstances.

Issues concerning:

- religious freedom;
- women's rights;
- the protection of minorities;
- individual privacy;
- and the situation of homosexuality and LGBT people;

should be examined according to the principles of justice, mercy, human dignity, and the preservation of life.

The objective is therefore not to import external models, but to employ the Islamic tradition's own intellectual tools to address contemporary realities.

VI. Islamic History as a Source of Renewal

Islamic history itself demonstrates that there has never been a single, uniform interpretation.

Throughout the centuries there emerged:

- different legal schools;
- philosophical traditions;
- mystical movements;
- diverse political experiences.

Saladinism regards this plurality as an expression of the intellectual richness of Islamic civilization and as a foundation for the continuous renewal of religious thought.

VII. Cultural Independence

Human dignity, justice, and mercy are universal ethical principles and belong neither exclusively to the East nor to the West.

The Islamic tradition possesses its own intellectual resources to develop independent responses to modern challenges without relying upon external political agendas.

VIII. Justice as the Supreme Objective

Inspired by Saladin's historical legacy, this reflexive theory maintains that true religious and political authority is manifested through the protection of human dignity.

Faithfulness to Islam is measured not only by the literal application of legal rules but also by the realization of justice, mercy, and the preservation of life, which constitute the higher objectives of divine revelation.

Conclusion

Saladinism proposes a contemporary hermeneutical philosophy inspired by Saladin's ethical legacy and grounded in the traditions of **Ijtihad** and the **Maqasid al-Shariah**. Rather than understanding the Shariah as an exclusively literal legal system, it views it as a framework directed toward achieving its higher objectives: justice, mercy, human dignity, and the protection of life.

From this perspective, the Islamic tradition is not regarded as a static inheritance but as an intellectual legacy capable of responding to the challenges of every age through the very instruments it has developed throughout its history. Saladinism therefore presents itself not as a break with Islam, but as a proposal for hermeneutical continuity, seeking to harmonize fidelity to divine revelation with ethical responsibility towards humanity.